



Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

October 3, 2014

Ronald E. Walters
Acting Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs
National Cemetery Administration
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Under Secretary Walters,

This letter is a follow up to our phone call from September 26, 2014, when we discussed the conditions at the Fort Bliss National Cemetery (FBNC).

In summary, the state of the Fort Bliss Cemetery is unacceptable.

The grounds are covered in small rocks, sand and dust. Countless veterans, widows and widowers have told me that these conditions do not allow them to kneel at the gravesite of a loved one, and during the hot summer months the barren grounds offer little refuge from the harsh sun. In response, your department argues that these conditions save water, are easier to maintain and are aesthetically pleasing.

Furthermore, beyond the lack of grass and greenery on the grounds, after every single significant rain event there is widespread damage to graves and headstones. (Please see the enclosed picture.)

There have been four of these in the last 21 months that I have been in office. We have contacted your office in writing after each one to ask for assistance and explanation for this ongoing problem. Your administration typically responds that this kind of damage happens at cemeteries throughout the NCA, and happened at Fort Bliss before it was xeriscaped. You add that because these other cemeteries are grassed, the extent of the damage is disguised and is not as obviously alarming as it is in a xeriscaped cemetery like FBNC. Furthermore, you contend that repairs to xeriscaped cemeteries are easier to make because there is no sod to be removed and replanted.

Here is my request. If xeriscaped cemeteries are the preferred option for all of these reasons -- from water conservation to aesthetics to grave repair -- I ask that you demonstrate to me and my community your plan to convert your most prestigious cemeteries from grass to xeriscaping. If that is not going to happen, I ask again that FBNC be converted back to grass and be maintained at the very highest standard of the NCA. If xeriscaping is "good enough" for El Paso, then it is good enough for the best cemeteries in your system. If xeriscaping is unacceptable for those cemeteries and the families of the veterans buried there, then it is also unacceptable to the veterans and their families in El Paso.

BETO O'ROURKE
16TH DISTRICT, TEXAS

COMMITTEE ON
HOMELAND SECURITY

COMMITTEE ON
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This community will no longer accept “good enough.”

Thank you,

Beto O'Rourke.

Beto O'Rourke
Member of Congress

